

PATRIARCHAL DOMINATION IN ARUNDHATI ROY'S GOD OF SMALL THINGS

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ABSTRACT

The topic I have chosen for my paper is about the patriarchal domination of women in Arundhati Roy's novel *God of Small Things* (1997). This novel won Booker Prize in literature. I am mainly focusing on the way how Arundhati Roy has aptly and beautifully portrayed class antagonism and class exploitation and dominance of police administration and the problem of love laws. Ranga Roy marks *The God of Small Things* as "one of our protest novels, radical and subversive and attacks several cows. In its taboo-breaking too, it goes farther than what has been attempted".

KEYWORDS: One of Our Protest Novels, Represented by Her Grandparents, Her School Teachers and Classmates

INTRODUCTION

Arundhati Roy (born November 24, 1961) is an Indian novelist, activist, and a world citizen. She won the Booker Prize in 1997 for her first novel *The God of Small Things*. Roy was born in Shillong, Meghalaya to a Keralite Syrian Christian mother and a Bengali Hindu father, a tea planter by profession. She spent her childhood in Aymanam, in Kerala, schooling in Corpus Christi. She left Kerala for Delhi at age 16, and embarked on a homeless lifestyle, staying in a small hut with a tin roof within the walls of Delhi's Feroz Shah Kotla and making a living selling empty bottles. She then proceeded to study architecture at the Delhi School of Architecture, where she met her first husband, the architect Gerard Da Cunha.

The God of Small Things is the only novel written by Roy. Since winning the Booker Prize, she has concentrated her writing on political issues. These include the Narmada Dam project, India's Nuclear Weapons, corrupt power company Enron's activities in India. She is a figure-head of the anti-globalization/alter-globalization movement and a vehement critic of neo-imperialism. In response to India's testing of nuclear weapons in Pokhran, Rajasthan, Roy wrote *The End of Imagination*, a critique of the Indian government's nuclear policies. It was published in her collection *The Cost of Living*, in which she also crusaded against India's massive hydroelectric dam projects in the central and western states of Maharashtra, Madhya Pradesh and Gujarat. She has since devoted herself solely to nonfiction and politics, publishing two more collections of essays as well as working for social causes. Roy was awarded the Sydney Peace Prize in May 2004 for her work in social campaigns and advocacy of non-violence. In June 2005 she took part in the World Tribunal on Iraq. In January 2006 she was awarded the Sahitya Akademi award for her collection of essays, 'The Algebra of Infinite Justice', but declined to accept it.

India is traditionally regarded as a male dominated society. For ages, the women have been suppressed, oppressed, confined, within the four walls of house with no identity of their own. Their wishes and desires were not taken into consideration by the patriarchal society. But in Post- Independence India, when women's education had already commenced and life had started changing, then the new woman started emerging. This education inculcated a sense of identity and individuality in women. They began to acknowledge their rights and became economically independent. And among these women, there was a striving for the realization of one's own self. They began to redefine their roles in society. C.D. Narasimhiah comments that the concept of the new woman "is a Western import born of Western

compulsions" (P 245-257). The new woman, however, is a compulsive emergence out of the traditional Indian scenario. The emerging new woman paves her own path and marches ahead to catch up with the rest of the world. According to the patriarchal society women identifies the real status in the society- as a mother, wife, and daughter. Ashok Kumar remarks: "In modern times she is accepted as a professional, but when she protests against injustice and exploitation, she is grudgingly termed activist and seen as a rebel or as a deviant" (P 21). The new women challenge the traditional notions and are aware of their own rights.

Arundhati Roy's efforts can be noticed in her novel *God of Small Things* by the way she depicts the desires, needs and agonies of women as well as the hypocrisy and double standards of men. This is the story of Ammu who leaves her home along with the twins when she discovers the moral character of her husband. Ammu challenges the 'Love Laws' and establishes an illicit relationship with Velutha, an untouchable- who is a fellow sufferer, smarting under the unjust laws of the society. Ammu's death is a final note in a life of suffering, but her suffering does give society a message to fight for the right cause. She is new in the dimension of time by being a rebel against the general current of patriarchal society in exploring her true potential. Along with the struggle to fulfill her urges and desires.

This novel deals with the important issues of gender discrimination and feminism in a patriarchal set up where women have no voice to speak in the total happiness of the family, where they are seldom allowed to be educated and where men always dominate over women. Ranga Roy in his scholarly paper rightly observes:

"Roy's book is the only one I can think of among Indian novels in English which can be comprehensively described as a protest novel. It is all about atrocities against minorities, small things: children and youth, women and untouchables" (P13).

This novel portrays a true picture of the sufferings of Indian women and their cares and anxieties and their submission and humiliation in the patriarchal society. It also portrays their struggle to seek a sense of identity in a totally envious society. Actually, women in these societies in the novel are treated as chattels by their male counterparts. This female subalternity has been depicted through three successive generations of women. The first generation is represented by Mammachi and Baby Kochhama. The very fact that Mamachhi got married to a man who is older than her by as many as seventeen years proves that she did not consider it right to question the authority of her parents in such matters. The novel also contains several other incidents that show her husband's behaviour towards her had been highly dictatorial and brutal during the best parts of her married life. For instance, Mamachhi's lessons on the violin "were abruptly discontinued when Mamachhi's teacher, Launsky-Tieffenthal, made a mistake of telling Papachhi that his wife was exceptionally talented and, in his opinion, potentially concert class" (P 50). She was regularly beaten up by her husband, but she never protested against her husband's injustices done to her. It shows that women of Mamachhi's generation believed in the belief that their husband is their God, and she must meekly obey and submit to his will in all matters. And there was no question of rebellion by any woman of that generation. Though Baby Kochamma was older than Mamachhi by about five years, she was comparatively less docile than her sister-in-law. She was courageous enough to fall in love with Father Mulligan, an Irish monk; for his sake she even displayed:

"...a stubborn single-mindedness (which a young girl in those days was considered as bad as a physical deformity- a harelip perhaps, or a club foot), Baby Kochamma defied her father's wishes and became a Roman Catholic. With special dispensation from the Vatican, she took her vows and entered a convent in Madras as a trainee novice" (P 24).

This clearly indicates that what she did was a rare thing to come across during the first quarter of the 20th century. It is also worth noting that Baby Kochamma was allowed by her father to pursue higher studies as he thought that his

daughter had by now developed a 'reputation' and was unlikely to find a husband. He decided that since she could not have a husband there was no harm in her having an education. Thus, only the girls with a 'bad reputation' were supposed to pursue higher education during those old days. Ammu who is in the second generation is shown as rebelling against patriarchal norms which are highly discriminatory according to her. Ammu is the central character of the novel is a tragic figure humiliated, insulted and misbehaved with by her father first then her husband and afterwards by her family members and society. The narrator portrays the picture of the protagonist's childhood to adolescence, to the experience of marriage, to a sympathetic and loving mother, to rebel wife who challenges the age old hypocritical moral stand of a patriarchal family. As a little girl, Ammu had to face a lot of trials and tribulations, cares and anxieties. She had seen the cruelty of her father, Papachhi, who used to beat her mother Mamachhi with a brass vase. Once it so happened that the father tore apart the shoes that she had brought for herself. The hypocritical nature of Papachhi is well observed when he behaved like a decent man in front of others but demonstrated his male ego and bourgeois mentality when he tyrannized his wife and child: "not content with having with beaten his wife and daughter his wife and daughter he tore down curtains, kicked furniture and smashed a table lamp" (P 181).

Meena Usmani says in her article "Violence against Women": "The women have frequently been ruthlessly exploited in our society and the problem is growing day by day. The case of eve teasing, sexual harassment, abduction, sati, rape and wife battering at the public and at the workplace etc. have been more regularly reported since the 1960s, the issue of violence against women are discriminated at work, home and denied their due in every field. The constitution of India promises freedom, equality, opportunity and protection to women and give them several rights. In spite of that they enjoy an unequal status" (P 42). Ammu is also deprived of education because, according to Pappachi, college education is not useful for a girl. Ammu had to forego education; but on the other hand, Chacko, her brother, was sent to Oxford for further studies. This episode is also an example of the double-standards of Pappachi. Thus, after completing her school education, she had nothing else to do except to help her mother in her household work, and wait for marriage proposals. But as her father did not have enough money to arrange a suitable dowry for her, no marriage proposal came for two years. Ammu feels suffocated and frustrated at Ayemenem and wishes to get out of it: "All day she dreamed of escaping from Ayemenem and the clutches of her ill tempered father and bitter long suffering mother. She hatched several wretched little plans. Eventually one worked. Pappachi agreed to let her spend the summer with a distant aunt who lived in Calcutta" (P 38-39). There, at a wedding reception she meets her future husband. He is on vacation from his job in Assam where he worked as an assistant manager of a tea estate. Ammu takes recourse in marriage to seek release from her life at Ayemenem and accepts her future husband on the pretext that anything, anyone at all, would be better than returning to Ayemenem: "Ammu didn't pretend to be in love with him. She just weighed the odds and accepted. She thought that anything, anyone at all, would be better than returning to Ayemenem. She wrote to her parents informing them of her decision. They didn't reply". (P 39).

But after marriage, Ammu discovers that she had jumped out of the frying-pan into the fire. Her husband proves to be alcoholic who goes to the extent of asking her to satisfy the carnal desire of Mr. Hollick, his boss, so that his job could be saved. Ammu decides not to take her husband's insults and excesses. She retaliates to reclaim her self-respect and dignity as a human being: "Ammu took down the heaviest book she could find in the bookshelf... and hit him with it as hard as she could. On his head. His legs. His back and shoulders" (P 42).

Ammu emerges as a true rebel and deserts her husband for good. She expresses her feminist stance by getting her wedding ring melted down and made into a bangle for Rahel. Ammu goes back to Ayemenem along with her twins- Estha and Rahel where she finds her parents indifferent to her and her children. It is a great irony that a daughter

estranged from the husband is tortured and tyrannized in the parents' house. But on the other hand, an estranged son, Chacko, not only receives a warm welcome but also remains the rightful inheritor of the family's wealth and fortune. His divorced wife and child are welcomed at Ayemenem whereas Ammu and her twins are looked down on as burdens to the family. Ammu's family does not lose any opportunity to make her realize that she and her children are intruders in that house. But by this time she has learnt to assert herself, and also to pay back in the same coin. At times she even: "...set aside the morality of motherhood and divorcehood. Even her walk changed from a safe mother-walk to another wilder sort of walk. She spent hours on the riverbank with her little plastic transistor shaped like a tangerine. She smoked cigarettes and had midnight swims" (P 44). The ire of the family begins to take its toll on Ammu when she challenges the 'Love Laws' and establishes an illicit relationship with Velutha, an untouchable who is another sufferer. Velutha represents the rebel outcaste with a growing awareness of the self and the talents of the deprived class.

Ammu loves Velutha for his fiery spirit of protest and somewhere down the line identifies her emotion of revolt with that of his. When Mammachi and Baby Kochamma learn about this relationship from Velutha's father they immediately lock her inside her room. Ammu and Velutha are subjected to the worst possible insults and atrocities. Chacko and Ammu are the recipients of the same punishment by fate. But society governs them with different laws. The label 'divorce' does not affect his position in society. Interestingly his sexual/biological need is justified both by Mammachi and Baby Kochamma: "She was aware of his libertine relationships with the women in the factory, but had ceased to be hurt by them. When Baby Kochamma brought up the subject, Mammachi became tensed and tight-lipped. 'He can't help having a Man's Needs gained an implicit sanction in the Ayemenem House" (P 168). Mammachi not only approves of Chacko's relationships as 'a Man's Needs' but also facilitates his illicit relationship with the factory women by getting a separate entrance built for Chacko's room, and also by secretly giving some money to these women for keeping her son sexually satisfied. But for Ammu her divorced life is a bane. The attitude of society towards a divorced daughter is reflected upon by Baby Kochamma: "She subscribed wholeheartedly to the commonly held view that a married daughter had no position in her parent's home. As for a divorced daughter – according to Baby Kochamma, she had no position anywhere at all. And as for a divorced daughter from a Love marriage, well, words could not describe Baby Kochamma's outrage. As for a divorced daughter from a intercommunity love marriage. Baby Kochamma chose to remain quiveringly silent on the subject".(pp 45-46).

When Ammu's biological need forces her to make love with Velutha, she is condemned for her entire life and has to pay dearly in terms of Velutha's death, separation of the twins, and finally her life. Thus, Velutha takes no cognizance of social conventions and restrictions and so comes into conflict with history and tradition without any chance of success. On the other hand, Ammu who antagonizes her family by marginalizing herself from society is maltreated by the governing body of the family. When her nocturnal rendezvous with Velutha is discovered and the drowning of Sophie Mol is wrongly associated with her illicit affair, she is asked to leave the house. Estha is also sent back to his father where he develops a reticent nature. The remaining part of Ammu's life is full of despondence tinged with fruitless day dreaming. She dies in a grimy room in the Bharat Lodge in Alleppey where she had gone to search for a job.

Amarnath Prasad gives a brief but powerful description of Ammu's character by saying: "Through the character of Ammu, Arundhati Roy lashes out at the hypocritical moral code of society, which makes a difference between men and women". (P 117).

Ammu is an entirely tragic character tortured and abused by the police, her family and politics. It is not the male folk alone responsible for her tragic plight but mostly the women characters namely Mammachi and Baby Kochamma who may be called the real culprits who engender suffering in Ammu's life.

Margaret Kochamma, a British lady, is another bold woman who rebels against the set patterns of the society. Margaret Kochamma was working as a waitress in a café in London when she first met Chacko. Like Ammu, she had left the house of her parents for no greater reason than a youthful assertion of independence. She has an ardent desire to be a good and gentle lady with enough money. One day when Chacko comes to the cafe she is drawn towards him and gets married to him. Her marriage to Chacko, an Indian, is resented by her parents so much so that they refuse to see her after the marriage. However, this untraditional, rebellious marriage does not prosper in a fruitful way. She gives birth to a daughter Sophie Mol. But she and Chacko do not lead a happy conjugal life. Infact it is the Indian male sensibility of a patriarchal family in Chacko that makes their life difficult. She suffers Chacko's male chauvinism: even when she is working and he is unemployed, he is not willing extend a helping hand in doing any of the household chores. They divorce and Chacko returns to India and teaches for some time at the Madras Christian College. After the death of his father he returns to Ayemenem. Just after the divorce Margaret marries Joe. A biologist and leads a happy life. But soon misfortune grips her life and Joe is killed in an accident. She along with Sophie Mol returns to her ex-husband at Ayemenem.

The novelist has also exposed the double standards of Indian society in judging the behaviour of men and women in matters of love and marriage and makes a scathing attack on these attitudes. Thus, Chacko's marriage with an English waitress is accepted, but not that of Ammu to a Bengali Hindu. Similarly, while Mammachi joyfully welcomes Chacko when he returns to Ayemenem after a divorce from his British wife, Ammu is treated with the utter disdain when she comes back to her parent's house after divorcing her Bengali husband.

Another character who rebels against these injustices of patriarchal society is Rahel who belongs to the third generation. While the second generation too puts up a good fight against the stringest norms of the phallocentric set up, the third generation revolts against these norms openly and most audaciously. Rahel exhibits her independence of thought and action even when she is in school. Though society (represented by her grandparents, her school teachers and classmates) tries to make her follow the age-old norms of so called good behaviour and conduct, she continues to follow her own whims and fancies. Even her expulsion from the schools and the virtual social boycott by her college-mates do not make her into a conformist. She marries, and after some time divorces an American, without bothering about the traditional norms. She also refuses to be cowed down by the embarrassing questions about marriage and divorce put to her by people like K.N.M. Pillai when she returns from America to her native place. However, it may be pointed out that while Rahel is able to assert her right to follow her own convictions, she does precious little to secure a similar freedom for any other women known to her. Perhaps the novelist is of the view that every woman has to work out her own salvation as no outside agency can deliver her from the bondage of prevalent social customs and traditions. The novelist has portrayed Rahel as representative of liberated Indian women as she defies the patriarchal norms of an Indian society. She is depicted as a model for the liberated Indian woman and she asserts herself strongly making her rebellion a strong one against the patriarchal structures. Ammu on the other hand is bold enough to leave her husband's house and cross the threshold of caste and creed for love. Though, a tragic figure Ammu gains the sympathy and respect of the readers. Baby Kochamma's rebellion fades in comparison to the other two because she doesn't make use of the opportunity to liberate herself and do something useful. Thus, this novel is about the women's characters' suffering under patriarchal domination.

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